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ABSTRACT

This study examined how race and ethnicity inform college friendships of women of color and sought to determine how these two variables altered the learning characteristics of such relationships. The study, at a predominantly white college campus, found these relationships consistent with the sociological definition of intentional communities and also found that such friendship communities fostered both integration and separation, relationships which are interdependent and mutually associated for women of color. It suggested that women of color, unlike their white peers, judge pedagogy and classroom climate not by the barometer of gender but rather by the barometer of race and ethnicity. Of the 41 African-American, Asian-American, and Latinas in the study, 87 percent chose a primary female friend of the same race and/or ethnicity. They used female friendships to: (1) develop a positive ethnic and/or racial self-image, (2) to engage in noncombative and noneducative "race talk" as a respite from racial and/or ethnic hypersensitivity and hostility, (3) to give and receive academic encouragement and support, and (4) to develop a gendered understanding of self within their ethnic and/or racial identifies. The same sororial relationships were also used to separate in order to integrate to judge their integration into the larger campus community. (Contains 15 references.) (DB)

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ASHE SYMPOSIUM
November 5, 1998 Miami Florida

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES: DO THEY FOSTER INTEGRATION OR SEPARATION?

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INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES: DO THEY FOSTER INTEGRATION OR SEPARATION?

ASHE SYMPOSIUM
November 5, 1998 Miami Florida

Ana M. Martínez Alemán
Boston College

As a student at Harvard Law School, Patricia J. Williams found herself an alien "silenced by the dense atmosphere" that "muted [her] voice to inaudibility." An African American female among white male student peers, she recalled that "all [she] could do to communicate [her] existence was to posit carefully worded messages" in her exams and to "pray that they would be plucked up by some curious seeker and understood." She believed herself to be on a "planet" governed by a teleology in which her race, which for worse and for better, explained everything about her (Williams, 1991, p. 55).

I recalled this moment in William's autobiographical treatise on race and American jurisprudence in the early summer of 1997 when the data from a study I had conducted on female friendship among undergraduate women of color began to take shape. Williams, I recollected, had accounted for her "feelings of exaggerated visibility and invisibility" at Harvard by reasoning that these feelings were a consequence of her absence from the dominant culture's consciousness (Williams, 1991, p. 56). Her presence magnified and diminished by the fact of her race, she stood as a student in the "perceptual consensus" of academic whiteness (p.56) and began to understand her alienation as the consequence of that "uncomfortable atmospheric condition" (p.56).

Like Williams, the women of color who shared with me their assessment and estimation of female friendship understand race and ethnicity to be <u>the</u> distinguishing

features of their presence in higher education and know that these collegiate relationships must consequently bear the same mark. As Williams would reason, these women are making connections with planetary creatures most 'like' themselves, connections which I came to understand are made in an attempt to find authenticity on their academic planet.

As a researcher, I was interested in assessing if these gendered and raced friendship connections are important for learning in this peer-relationship. In my previous research I had stipulated that college women's friendships are learning relationships in which college women can experience learning that is "purposeful, practical, and productive" (Martínez Alemán, p. 144, 1997); that these are relationships through which women's identities consciously evolve and become "more complex and sophisticated" (p. 141). Other researchers have found that women articulate self and develop their identities through women's female friendship talk (Aries & Johnson, 1983) and research on peer interaction among college students reveals the positive effects of peer group on cognition (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella, et. al., 1997; & Whitt, et. al., 1997). Thus, we can assert that college women's friendships are relationships in which cognitive development, a process closely tied to identity development takes place.

But much of this research has not specifically focused on how (as variables co-existent with gender) race and ethnicity inform college women's female friendships, or how these variables alter the learning character of these relationships. For example, if we know that discussions about ethnic and racial issues have a positive effect on cognition among college students (Kuh, 1995) and that student peer group interactions have a

significant effect on critical thinking (Whitt et al., 1997), then what can be said about interactions (and their effects) between women of color and their female friends?

Thus, I posed the following research questions: If we know that among white women on college campuses, female friendship is a site for "intellectual performance," a performance in which the development of self as gendered identity is negotiated and understood (Martínez Alemán, 1997) and if we know that race and ethnicity can be critical variables in the development of self-worth and positive identity construction (Gurin, Hurtado, & Peng, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; Tajfel, 1981; Tatum, 1992), then how do race and ethnicity inform African- and Asian-American women's and Latinas' female friendships? What cognitive purposes do race and ethnicity serve in these women's female friendships? How are race and ethnicity consequential for peer learning among undergraduate women of color?

For the purposes of our discussion today, I'd like to focus my remarks on how female friendship among and between women of color on a predominantly white campus can be understood as an "intentional community." Particularly gendered and marked by race and/or ethnicity, these peer relationships certainly meet the conceptual criteria necessary for "intentional communities" as set out by this panel. As intentional communities, the female friendships of women of color on a predominantly white campus

(a) do serve to strengthen academic self-confidence through validation and affirmation

(b) are sites for critically understanding and appropriating of cultural capital

(c) are sites for the acquisition of tacit knowledge

(d) are necessary for identity development because they serve to inform, disturb, challenge, and reinforce women's level of satisfaction with "self"

I will further suggest that these sororial relationships are consistent with the sociological definitions[1] of intentional communities. These relationships

(a) are models of subaltern resistance

(b) are historical

(c) are forms of collective behavior which are typically defensive

(d) are "actor-oriented" and originate in the lived realities of these women

(e) are a form of "radical juxtaposition" to college culture

Furthermore, I will propose that the answer to the question posed by the symposium, "Do these intentional communities foster integration ***or*** separation?" is, simply, yes. It seems to me that these sororial relationships, when understood as intentional communities, do foster separation ***or*** integration.

The affirmative answer to the question is not an act of semantic brattiness on my part—that the affirmative response is indicative of the logical verity of the statement—that the sentence is truthful because one of the constituent elements is true. But rather, it is because in the real lives of these women of color on this predominantly white campus, separation and integration are not antithetical but sympathetic operational positions. Integration and separation are interdependent and mutually associated states of being and behaving for the women of color in this study.

Let me review briefly my assessment of the data from the study and then return to the question of integration or separation.

The data from this study reveal that female friendship serves undergraduate women of color in many of the ways in which it serves their white peers but with some significant differences[2]. As a learning relationship, female friendship among women of color serves as a relationship in which they reconcile the constructed barrier between autonomous and interdependent learning, a phenomenon found among their white peers. These friendships, like those of their white peers, seem to serve as alternatives to pedagogies that demand classroom performances perceived as antagonistic and intellectually risky (Martínez Alemán, 1997). But unlike their white peers, women of color judge pedagogy and classroom climate not by the barometer of gender but rather by the barometer of race. In other words, unlike the white women of the initial study, these undergraduate women of color use female friendship to counter perceived race and/or ethnic classroom chilliness, not gender indifference. Where white women in the original study used female friendship to counter the learned or imposed gendered behaviors of the college classroom (reticence, silence, fear of negative judgment by peers, etc.), women of color consciously use female friendship to enact a raced or ethnic critique. These friendships are where women of color corroborate, examine, and explore incidents of racism and ethnocentrism in the classroom. The "free-flowing, playful, and risk-free performance" that for white women constitutes "purposeful, practical, and productive learning" (p.144) is most often specifically dedicated to matters of racism and

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[1] See Schehr, R. C. (1997). Dynamic utopia: Establishing intentional communities as a new social movement. Westport, CT: Bergin & Harvey.

ethnocentricity for women of color, with some time devoted to issues specific to being women in their particular racial or ethnic group. For example, though white women use their female friendships to exchange information about being women on campus, women of color use female friends as sources for information about campus life for persons of color, and as a source of information about being women within their particular racial and/or ethnic groups. This information is shared among women in the same class year or passed down to a younger woman of color. This information serves to warn younger women about subtle forms of racism and ethnocentrism, and about the ways in which self-confidence and self-esteem can be eroded. What we see, then, in the female friendships of these women of color is a decidedly racial and ethnic character that I assessed to be pragmatic, intuitive, and developmental in nature.

In sum, unlike the white women of my previous study, these African-American and Asian-American women and Latinas most regularly seek out these relationships to

(a) develop a positive ethnic and/or racial self-image and identities independent of the racist and/or ethnocentric definitions imposed on them by the college environment;

(b) engage in non-combative and non-educative "race talk" that is a respite from racial and/or ethnic hypersensitivity and hostility;

(c) give and receive academic encouragement and support; and

(d) develop a gendered understanding of self within their ethnic and or racial identities.

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[2] It is important to note that of the 41 women who participated in the study, 87% chose a primary female friend of the same race and/or ethnicity.

These themes mark the friendship conversations among of women of color. They emerge, it seems to me, out of the real need to engage in the development of salient features of identity--race and/or ethnicity--which on this predominantly white campus appears to require a relationship of familiarity largely determined by those very features. Yet this development is carried out in sororial relationship suggesting that despite the fact that race and/or ethnicity trump gender, gender is acutely operational.

Now back to the question of separation and integration and intentional community. To suggest that female friendship among undergraduate women of color is a site of intentional community is, in my view, to suggest a phenomenological intentionality. As individuals marked by categories of identity, undergraduate women of color touch the concrete world of college culture, making meaning of that action, and then analyzing the constitutive structures of their experiences. Their "intentional" friendships are states of mind through which and in which they judge, remember, and imagine self.

In the intentional community of female friendship, women of color remember that their identified lives are what Argentina philosopher María Lugones has termed, "*mestizaje*", a metaphor for "impure resistance". Neither unified, nor simple, nor pure, women of color are subjects negotiating the "politics of purity," politics that insist that they are either purely women or purely color-ed, that they are outside of history and culture (Lugones, 1994, p.458-9). Thus to see these friendships as purely separation or integration is to dismiss the reality of their impure subjectivities. These friendships, simultaneously sexed and raced and ethnic, are communities in which the cultural impurities--their sex and their race and/or ethnicity—those inferior or substandard

identities—enable them to judge their integration into the actuality of college life. It is here, too, that they imagine their authenticity. It is here that they claim fidelity to their "impurities" and where claim their subjective credibility. Then, as credible subjects, they intend and act decisively on their alien academic planet.

It is the development of self, of subjectivity, that is the integrative move in these relationships but let's recall that it is integration borne of simultaneous separation. The undergraduate women of color who participated in my study of female friendship are actors who by virtue of their *mestizaje*—that they are "women" and "of color"—undertake a destined function, to separate in order to integrate. Their friendship, it seems to me, readies them for these sympathetic operations of separation and integration. Hence, the intention of female friendship among women of color on this particular predominantly white campus is to execute the sympathetic operations of separation and integration. This intentional community makes possible a gendered and raced subjectivity able to effectively travel the perilous planet of academic whiteness.

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